

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany 2015 (5B)
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The fortieth chapter of the book of Isaiah begins what is often called “Second Isaiah.” We call it that because the book of Isaiah seems to have been written in three parts, by at least three different people, at three different times in the history of the Jewish people. The three sections are marked by changes in message, changes in vocabulary, and changes in tone that make the divisions very clear.

First Isaiah, which comprises chapters one through thirty-nine, was written about two thousand seven hundred years ago, as Israel faced threats from the Assyrian and then Babylonian empires. The prophecies in First Isaiah call on the people to repent their faithlessness and return to God, and blame the faithlessness of the people for the troubles they are facing. Eventually, the Babylonian empire overthrows Jerusalem, destroys the temple and the city walls, and carries most of the inhabitants off into exile.

Second Isaiah was written about two hundred years later, as the exile, sometimes called the Babylonian Captivity, was about to end. King Cyrus and the Persian army have overthrown Babylon, and the Israelites are going to be allowed to return to Jerusalem. Chapter forty has an exalted tone –it begins with the lyrical passage that we read during Advent –“Comfort, comfort you my people.”

But the Israelites, it turns out, are not comforted. Few of them want to return to Jerusalem, with no Temple and no city walls to protect them, and nothing but hard work ahead of them. They are wondering what kind of God would allow such a thing to happen to them, and many of them think that maybe Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, might just be more powerful than their God, and that maybe where they are, as difficult as life is, might be better than going back to a ruined home with a God too weak to protect them.

And it is those fears and doubts that God, speaking through Isaiah, answers: Have you not known? Have you not heard? God is not just better, stronger, wiser than Marduk and all the other so-called gods of the other kingdoms, God is the only god – wiser, more powerful, more creative, loftier, more distant, more god-like than you can even imagine. So distant and powerful that from God's perspective we humans look like grasshoppers.

And if you think that that might not be the most comforting thing to say to a people who have been living in exile, forced to hard labor, for many generations, you'd be right. Isaiah's flock are not comforted by the awe and majesty of God. They are not comforted to hear that God's power and glory make them seem insignificant in contrast. Would you be? The Israelites don't need to be convinced of their insignificance. The way that they have been battered about by the imperial conflicts of the Middle East has already convinced them of that.

What they need to hear is what comes next in Isaiah's message – that they do matter, that God, even from such a lofty height, actually sees and knows and cares about each one of them.

“Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

The two messages need to go together. “Have you not known that God is lofty and powerful beyond imagining? Have you not known that God will give you the strength you need?

It is not despite, but because of God's infinite godliness that God is able to be with each person all the time, without tiring out or slowing down.

Admittedly, this is not a very good answer to the question that the Israelites have been asking all through their long exile: why has God allowed this to happen to us? To tell you the truth, although that is the most vexing question for anyone attempting to live a life of faith, scripture never provides a very good answer. Why

bad things happen to good people, why an all-powerful God allows evil to exist, why we suffer is the question that both brings us to and drives us from faith.

Lots of answers have been proposed. Original Sin. Total human depravity. Divine retribution for sins not necessarily known. The necessary but regrettable consequence of giving us free will. The great theologians throughout history, not just in the Judeo-Christian tradition have wrestled with the question. There's even a whole branch of theological study called Theodicy devoted to the issue. The book of Job takes it up in the form of a novel. Augustine and Aquinas and Calvin and Bonhoeffer have written volumes about it.

And in the end, none of the answers that anyone has come up with are completely satisfying from a theological standpoint. And, perhaps more importantly, none of them satisfy from a human standpoint. We cannot suffer, or watch the suffering of others, without asking God why.

And over and over again, in Isaiah and Job and most definitively in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's answer to the question, why do we suffer is "I am with you."

This may not seem like any better answer to the question than the theological answers. But it is, I think, the best possible answer. When we seek reasons for the suffering in the world, we're not really looking for an explanation, we are looking for someone to blame. We don't want answers so much as we want accountability.

But in refusing to answer the question with anything other than God's own presence, God undermines the whole notion of blame and accountability. We seek blame, but God offers love instead. We want to know why, and God gives us how – not just how to face suffering, knowing that God is with us, but how to respond to suffering when we encounter it, by also saying, "I am here."

In the next life we may finally be able to understand the why of human suffering. It's pretty clear from God's silence on the subject that we're not going to find out in this life. But we can be confident that God, with all that might and majesty, is with us in our suffering, and even suffers with us. And because that knowledge itself isn't always comfort enough, it is our calling as children of God to be with one another in our suffering as well. There is nothing more comforting, in our grief or pain or fear, than to hear the words, "I am here."

Amen.